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HENRY ADAMS

By PAUL ELMER MORE

PREPARED FOR
THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
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1920



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THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS AND LETTERS

TO VINU
ALPHABETIC

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HENRY ADAMS

BY PAUL E. MORE

By the death of Henry Adams, in March of 1918, in his eighty-first year, the Academy lost a member distinguished in many ways, a man who reveled in all the riddles of life and himself left for those curious in the natural history of the human soul a riddle not easily solved. In one respect he was American by every fiber of his being. Great-grandson of the second President of the United States, grandson of a later President, son of the Minister to the Court of St. James's during the trying years of the Civil War, reared in a tradition of almost chauvinistic patriotism, he might

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be regarded as an impersonation of that New Englandism which penetrated the bones and marrow of the national character. And he was, throughout life, acutely conscious of his inheritance.

Yet from another side he was conspicuously un-American; and of this, too, he was conscious, and never felt really at home in the land of his ancestors. It was a difference in mind, in thought, which, whatever else may be said, has not been "the master part of us," and which was so in Henry Adams. This is not to say that America is mentally sluggish, or has failed of large accomplishment in scholarship and invention and the arts; but that detached intellectuality which dissolves the substance of life into a question, that restless inquisitiveness which pierces all veils of custom and is only strengthened the more it is baffled, that outreaching of "the imperious

lonely thinking power" which makes an imprisonment of its very freedom, the spirit, in a word, which Matthew Arnold described in his *Empedocles*,—these are distinctly not American, and they distinctly are what characterize Henry Adams.

The variety of his intellectual achievement is more remarkable than their magnitude. As a teacher of history at Harvard for seven years he was one of the pioneers of the semi-nary method of study. Besides other more or less notable works in this field he published a *History of Jefferson's and Madison's Administrations*, monumental in bulk, and almost unique in its combination of documentary research, philosophical reflection, and literary charm. He divulged a scientific theory of the periods of human growth and decline in history which is strikingly original and, it must be added, rather sad. For six years he

edited the *North American Review*, then the most solid magazine of the country. He wrote two novels, one of which, *Democracy*, aroused a good deal of heated comment by its satirical picture of Washington political society. He composed verse, not much in quantity, but weighted with thought and emotion and technically more than respectable. His letters, printed since his death, show him to have been a master of the quaint and whimsical in this delicate *genre*. Above all he has left two books of extraordinary quality, his *Education* and his *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, one of which is like the portrait of a naked mind caught by some art of spiritual photography, the other of which has made the whole mental and emotional life of the twelfth century a vehicle for the same insatiate personality. This, however one may judge the individual works, is a record scarcely paralleled

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by the production of any other American author.

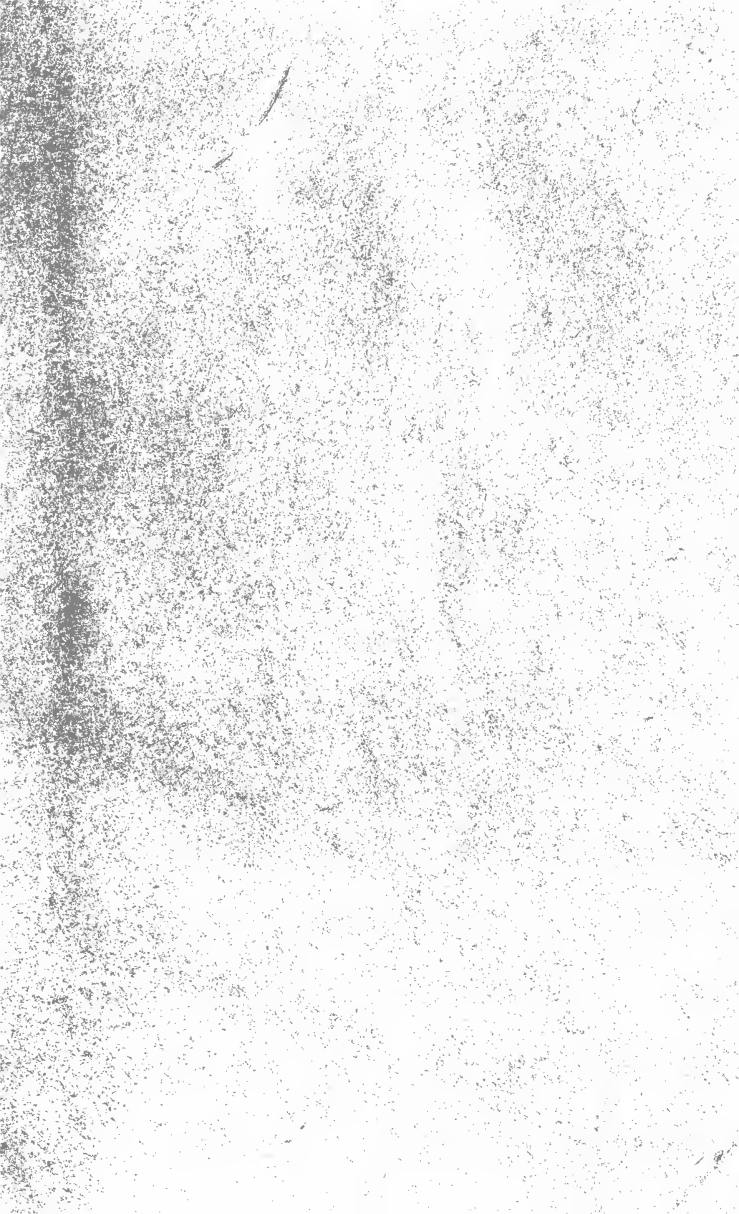
In the long run interest probably will center on the last two works, the *Education* and the *Mont-Saint-Michel*. By education Adams meant not at all the mere accumulation of knowledge, of which, nevertheless, he had abundance, but that insight into the nature of things which should enable a man to know what the world is and what he himself is, and so to adjust his life to the forces that play upon it. In that sense education came to our Academician slowly, if it came at all, and the pages of his autobiography are a continual, and sometimes a bitter, complaint over the fact that he, the heir of all the ages and of all the Adamases, should be held at bay by the baffling sphinx of existence.—He sent his intellect to work in the various fields of learning of which the century was so proud—history, science,

politics, art, religion—seeking an answer to the question everywhere put to him: Why are you here, and who am I who set you here? Only at the end of his life did he read the riddle, and for those who read his books left another riddle to solve.

Standing before the great dynamo at the Paris Exposition, in 1900, he thought he saw in that wheel, revolving with such vertiginous speed, so terribly silent, so majestically regular in its motion, a symbol of the ruthless, impersonal force which science discovers at the center of the universe: "Among the thousand symbols of ultimate energy, the dynamo was not so human as some, but it was the most expressive." Then from this inhuman sign he turned, by a kind of revulsion of feeling, to what was most opposite to it in every respect. He wrote his book to show that the Virgin Mother of God, in whose honor the cathe-

dral of Chartres had been raised and adorned, was the real object of worship in the Middle Ages just because she was the symbol and warrant of something inconsequent, whimsically merciful, contemptuous of law, human, feminine, in the governing of the world. That he should have turned from one to the other of these forces is not strange, but that he should have found it consonant to adore them together is a feat of audacious thinking, if not of education.





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